

The track—it could scarcely be called a road—was simply a narrow path beaten through the tall grama-grass and reeds of the prairie, which rose on either hand five or six feet high, all matted and tangled together with wild pea-vines and creepers; it was burnt quite crisp and brown by the heat of the sun, and was as dry as tinder. As they brushed it in passing, the twigs and canes, snapped at a touch.

Right ahead, fifteen miles away, rising blue above the undulations of the prairie, was a steep bluff, the termination of a range of low hills, offshoots of the Rocky Mountains. This bluff was their landmark and guide, for a mile or two behind it was the Red Ranch settlement, or North cotes, as it was often called.

Meanwhile the clear blue of the sky was becoming overcast with a sultry, leaden haze. The air was intensely hot and heavy. The wide, treeless, shadowless prairie rolled away on every side in long undulations like the swells of the great ocean.

At last Fred grew tired of keeping up even a show of resentment, and began to talk again.

"How well Miss Mollie goes to-day."

"She always does," returned Nancie, a shade more graciously than before; she was tired of keeping silent so long.

"All the same, I would not back her against Hotspur."

"No, because Hotspur would be beaten," asserted Nancie, confidently.

"Will you try?" he asked.

"No, I won't. It is too hot to race. How can you suggest such a thing in this blazing sun?"

"Hot or not, it strikes me it is what you will have to do," he remarked coolly.

"What do you mean?" she said, raising a pair of dark, incredulous eyes.

"Look there!" and, raising his whip, Fred pointed to the right, behind them, whence the leaden-hued cloud was spreading over the sky. "What does that look like?"

Nancie turned her eyes in the direction indicated, and as she looked her face was blanched to an awful whiteness.

"Fire! The prairie is on fire!" she cried, fearfully. "Oh, Fred, what shall we do?" Involuntarily she drew up her horse and gazed anxiously around.

The ominous leaden gray haze was sweeping down upon them already it had crept around behind them. Below the haze a faint line of dull red was just visible.

"Yes, the prairie is on fire, sure enough, the young man said. "Don't be frightened, Nancie; we must fly from it, that is all. What a mercy our horses are to be depended on!" He had thrown himself off Hotspur as he spoke, and began to tighten the saddle-girths and straps of both horses—a precaution necessary enough in the race before them.

"Shall we be in time?" asked Nancie, in a low voice, as he stooped by her side.

"Yes," he replied confidently; and she did not see the anxiety on his brown face as he slipped the buckle into its place.

In two or three minutes he had remounted. As he gathered the reins in his hand he gave a glance at Nancie. She was seated quietly in her saddle, gazing straight before her.

"Are you frightened, Nancie?" he asked anxiously.

She turned her dark clear eyes to his. Her face was pale, but there was no sign of any weakness about the steady, brave mouth.

"No, I am not frightened," she answered gravely, but smiling back into his anxious face. "But I know the danger."

"And how we can escape," he said reassuringly. "Now for it!"

In another moment they were flying along. There was no need to urge Hotspur and Miss Molly—they scented the danger, and could scarcely be restrained.

The bluff showed blue in the distance, fifteen miles away; they had to gain that before they would be safe; but between them were fifteen long miles of rough, entangled track, and behind them was a waste of hot, dry tinder, which caught fire with lightning-like rapidity. The odds against them seemed awful!

A faint, trimulous wind suddenly overtook them. The sunshine died out as a deep, black shadow stole over the plains. Flocks of birds flew past them silently. Wild-dogs, prairie-hens, hares and rabbits scudded along through the grass and tangled reeds. Scarcely daring to look back they pressed on, their horses straining every nerve. Five miles was passed, six, seven. They were getting on well, but the fire behind was getting on better.

Looking back and seeing how fast it was gaining on them, Fred would have given worlds to have Nancie safe at home. They reached a belt of low trees, a conspicuous landmark on the prairie. Just eight miles more before them! Heavens, it seemed like a journey across the world! And the awful tugging at their hearts—the horrible dread! Already a low, sullen roar was heard behind them. The wind was increasing every moment; birds flew by with hoarse shrieks, and a horrible gloom was settling around them. On, on they went, not speaking a word, except now and then to encourage the horses. Not that they needed it; they were galloping along like race-horses, every sinew and muscle strained to the utmost.

Great clouds of smoke were now overtaking them, circling and eddying above their heads. A pungent-smelling vapor came creeping along the ground, almost suffocating them with its fumes. The dull, rushing roar of the fire increased every moment behind them, while the snapping of the cane-brakes and the crackling of the dry grama grass were distinctly audible. Still they were getting on. Seven, six, five miles. The fire was gaining on them with awful rapidity, but the cliff was rising clear and distinct before them. Half an hour more and they would be safe. Suddenly, without a moment's warning, Nancie's horse stumbled in a hole, pitched heavily forward, and fell on her knees. Fred threw himself off Hotspur in an instant, and, before Nancie could free her foot from the stirrup, was at her side.

"What is it?" cried Nancie. "Is she hurt? And, though her voice was steady, she trembled violently.

A glance was sufficient to show the injury.

"One of her legs is broken," he replied.

"You must ride behind me. Quick, Nancie, there is no time to lose!" mounting Hotspur as he spoke, and holding out his hand to help her to mount. "Quick your hand!"

"Oh, Fred, I cannot leave her to be burnt to death!" cried Nancie, bending over Miss Mollie, who looked up at her mistress with agonized eyes, and uttered a low moan of intense suffering.

Fred drew a pistol from his holster.

"There is no other way," he said, quietly, as he fired.

With a sob Nancie turned silently from her favorite, and gave her hand to Fred. In another minute they were flying over the plain. Alas, with how small a chance now! The gallant horse, strive as he might, made but little way with his double burden. There were only a few miles more. Already the air was scorching. The smoke and vapor enveloped them in suffocating clouds, hiding the bluff from view, and choking them with their stifling breath.

The roar of the fire sounded fearfully near—the moments flew fast, and the deadly sounds behind grew more distinct. The wind had increased to a tempest, which blew the smoke in denser clouds over them. A lurid yellow glare tinged the heavy, rolling masses, and the heat of the conflagration was perceptibly felt.

"Is there a chance?" whispered Nancie, looking fearfully behind, as the good horse strained onward.

"Yes, if we can hold out for ten minutes more," he answered.

"Heaven help us!" she cried, closing her eyes as a furious blast of wind brought a breath of fierce heat against her cheek.

He drew her arm closely around him, taking one small hand in an eager and covetous grasp.

"Pray for us, Nancie," he whispered quietly.

Only two miles now. Ten little minutes of time and they would be safe. But Hotspur was failing. He sprang forward now with convulsive bounds, and his gallant limbs trembled beneath him; every breath was a short, gasping sob.

Another mile—half a mile! Oh Heaven, have mercy! The scorching breath of the fire was upon them; they were in a whirlwind of dense, suffocating smoke. The horse stumbled at every step—he gasped and moaned like a human soul in extremity. Covered with foam and trembling convulsively, he struggled on. Little flames and eddies of fire, heralds of the horrors behind, crept among the tangled grass.

Fred turned in the saddle and tried to draw Nancie's head down on to his breast. She made no resistance, but, when he would have hidden her eyes from sight, she lifted them, clearly and unflinchingly, to his.

"Don't Fred; I can face death with open eyes," she said; and, catching hold of his hand, she pulled it gently away. As she did so a great shower of sparks, borne on the fierce wind, fell around and over them.

"Oh, my darling, to think this should be the end!" he cried, despairingly, knowing how very near it was now.

"No, no," she cried, "it is not the end! See—we are close to the bluff! Oh, thank Heaven, thank Heaven!" And she pointed to the towering rock which a rift in the smoke rising right before them, not fifty yards away. "On Hotspur—on, good horse—one more struggle—on, on!" she shouted encouragingly.

Cheered by her voice and hand, the brave horse gathered all his strength for one tremendous effort, and bounded forth with frantic leaps. But it was an expiring struggle. Ere ten yards were passed he fell to the ground gasping and panting, his brave spirit overcome at last. Fred dragged Nancie away, and, seizing her hand, began running toward the bluff so near now, so near; and yet one look back she gave. The fire was close behind, a fearful sight. The fierce heat scorched their faces, and sparks of the burnt grass, cane and splinters of wood fell in showers about them. The stifling choking smoke half suffocated them, paralyzing every nerve.

On, on, with frantic, flying feet—safety in front, death behind—and such a death!

"Leave me, Fred," gasped Nancie faintly. I can go no further. Tell them at home—my love—kiss me once, Fred, and—"

She dropped to the ground with a choking sob. With a wild cry he caught her up in his arms and staggered on. They were close to the bluff now. A dozen steps and he gained the foot of the ascent. Stumbling, struggling, panting, he pressed on, up the face of the rock.

The fire rushed after him, sending out long tongues of flame as if to grasp its prey; it licked up the scanty herbage, and roared and roared in fierce fury. But a few more yards!

"Oh Heaven, have mercy!" Staggering, dizzy, almost frantic, he struggled on, step after step, step after step. One more! "Oh, thank Heaven, thank Heaven! Safety at last!"

It was a terribly narrow escape. So close had been the fire, so deadly the peril, that it seemed as if only a miracle had saved them.

Half an hour afterward, when they had recovered sufficient strength to struggle onward to the Red Ranch, they began to realize to what an extremity of danger they were reduced. Their clothes looked like tinder, and hung on them in shreds and patches. Nancie's face was deadly white, except for a vivid scar down one side of her cheek and neck, where a scorching flame had caught it. Fred's right arm was completely disabled; his hands and face were a deep crimson in hue. The fire had scorched him terribly.

As they crept slowly along, Fred looked wistfully into Nancie's face.

"Did you mean it, Nancie?" he asked gently.

"Mean what?" she said, her eyes dropping shyly before his.

"What you said a while ago. Will you kiss me Nancie, my own dear love?"

"Yes," she whispered, turning her sweet face to his.

#### A Terrible Situation.

Charles May and his brother Robert, in the Spring of 1870, offered to pass 60,000 railroad ties down the Arkansas, from the mountain source. He says:

"Our offer was accepted, when we started into the upper entrance of the canon with a skiff, provided with six days provisions and 200 feet of rope, with which, by taking a running turn around some firmly planted object we, could lower our boats a hundred feet at a time. In this way, at the end of three days, having set adrift many hundred ties, we reached the entrance of the Royal George. Here we discovered that an attempt to ascend the first waterfall with two in a boat was certain destruction, and to return impossible. Accordingly, I determined to lower my brother down the fall in the boat a distance of 200 feet, give him the rope and let him take the chance of the canon, (life seemed more certain in that direction,) while I would risk my physical ability to climb the canon wall, which was about 2,000 feet high.

About ten o'clock in the morning I shook hands with my brother, lowered him in the boat safely to the foot of the fall, gave him the rope, and saw him no more. Then throwing aside my coat, hat and boots, and stripping the

socks from my feet, I commenced my climbing way, often reaching the height of one or two hundred feet, only to be compelled to return to try some other way. At length about four o'clock in the afternoon, I reached a high upon the smooth canon wall of about a thousand feet. Here my further progress was arrested by a shelving ledge of rock that jutted out from the canon side a foot or more. To advance was without hope; to return, certain death. Reaching upward, I grasped the rim of the ledge with one hand and then with the other, my foot slipped from the smooth side of the canon, and my body hung suspended in the air a thousand feet above the roaring waters of the Arkansas.

"At that moment I looked downward to measure the distance I would have to fall when the strength of my arms gave out. A stinging sensation crept through my hair as my eye caught the strong root of a cedar bush that projected over the ledge, a little beyond my reach. My grasp upon the rim of the ledge was fast yielding to the weight of my person. Then I determined to make my best effort to raise my body and throw it sideways toward the root so as to bring it within my grasp. At the moment of commencing the effort I saw my mother's face as she leaned out over the ledge, reaching down her hand and caught me by the hair. Stranger, my mother died while yet a young woman, when I and my brother were yet small boys, but I remember her face. I was successful in making the side leap of my arms, when I drew myself upon the ledge and rested for a time. From here upward my climbing way was laborious, but less dangerous. I reached the top of the canon just as the sun was sinking down beyond the snowy range, and hastened to our camp at the mouth of the canon, where I found my brother all safe. 'Charley,' said he, 'have you had your head in a sack of flour?' It was then that I discovered that my hair was as white as you see it now."

#### He was not a Veteran.

An aged man came into our sanctum yesterday. Deep-eyed sadness sat on his eyebrows, like a frog on the shore of a mill-pond. His attire faultless in regard to ventilation; in fact, he looked as if he was a model for some house that manufactured ventilators. His shoes showed two long slits for admitting air, which could come out at his knee, elbow or hat, the whole system of ventilation being perfect and complete. He hung his hat up on the third hook from the door, being the one set in diamonds, and drawing our new morocco footstool up to his feet, sat down and opened fire.

"I am probably the only survivor of one of the most desperate charges at Gettysburg," said he. "I was on the very spot which the rebels and the Union soldiers charged over ten times, and I never stirred out of my tracks. I was right where fifteen cannon balls tore up the earth in every direction, tearing men to pieces, and finally flinging back the torn armies in confusion."

"Did you escape?" we asked.

"I did."

"You escaped? But you were wounded?"

"Not much."

"But certainly your clothes were pierced with bullets?"

"Not a bit of it. Nary a bullet."

"And yet you want money. No, sir! Had your head been shot off, or a cannon-ball torn you in bits, or 229 bullets been lodged in your body, we might have given you ten cents; but as it is, charity must begin at home. John, bring us a five cent cigar."

"But I'm the only survivor," persisted this old veteran. "Then go hire a hall, and charge ten cents for the exhibition."

"Exhibition be hanged!" said he. "Give me ten cents, and I'll tell you how I didn't get killed."

It was a tempting bait, and was taken. Then he sided towards the door as he remarked:

"I was on the very spot where the charge was made. I stood where the bullets fell like rain, but—'twas a month after it happened."

#### A Curious Lake.

In Colorado is a ten-acre field which is no more nor less than a subterranean lake covered with soil about eight or ten inches deep. On the soil is cultivated a field of corn, which produces thirty or forty bushels to the acre. If any one will take the trouble to dig a hole the depth of a spade-handle he will find it to fill with water, and by using a hook and line, fish four or five inches long can be caught. The fish have neither scales nor eyes and are perch-like in shape. The ground is a black marl in its nature, and in all probability was at one time an open body of water, on which was accumulated vegetable matter, which has been increased from time to time, until now it has a crust, sufficiently strong and rich to produce fine corn, though it has to be cultivated by hand as it is not strong enough to bear the weight of a horse. While harvesting, the field hands catch strings of fish by punching a hole through the earth. A person rising on his heel and coming down suddenly can see the growing corn shake all around him. Any one having the strength to drive a nail through this crust will find on releasing it that it will disappear altogether. The whole section of country surrounding this field gives evidence of marshiness, and the least rain produces an abundance of mud. But the question comes up, has not this body an outlet? Although brackish, the water tastes as if fresh, and is evidently not stagnant. Yet these fish are eyeless and scaleless—similar to those found in caves.

#### A Button Letter-Holder.

How a letter from a soldier to his wife only a few hundred miles away, sent more than fifteen years ago, never reached its destination and was not seen by anybody until last month, is told by the *Troy Times*. The soldier was a prisoner in Richmond, and the letter, which he did not wish to send open, as the rules established for such correspondence required, was inclosed in one of the brass buttons of a surgeon's coat. This surgeon, Dr. Ketchum, was also a prisoner and about to be exchanged. His other eleven coat buttons contained eleven other letters. This one was written on a sheet of paper four and a half inches long by three inches wide, and must have been written with great care by a skillful penman, to compass so many words into so small a space. The other letters were all duly delivered, but in some way this one was overlooked. Last month a little boy to whom the button had been given, having heard his mother tell how the prisoners sometimes put letters in military buttons so as to send them secretly, asked his father to open his button and see if it had a letter in it. The button was opened and the letter was found.